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Women in Prison

by Bonnie Kerness



I've been working with the American Friends Service Committee in Newark as a human rights advocate on behalf of prisoners for the past 23 years. The relationships between women living in poverty and women being incarcerated is indisputable. There are currently over 950,000 women in criminal justice custody in the US with thousands more living under other forms of social control such as parole or probation. Since 1980 the number of women entering prisons in the US has risen almost 400%, double the rate of men. Women of color are imprisoned at rates between ten and thirty-five times greater than the rates of white women in fifteen states. New York is one of those states. Nearly a quarter of these women are mentally ill, with untold numbers being infected with AIDS. Forty percent held no jobs prior to imprisonment, two thirds of them are women of color and 60% of them are mothers of an estimated 1.3 million children. The average age of women in prison is 29 and 58% haven't finished high school. Without any fanfare, the "war on drugs" in this country has become a war on women and it has clearly contributed to the explosion in the women's prison population.

I'd like to share with you some of the voices of the women in prison that I hear during my day:

From New Jersey, "We are forced to sleep on the floor in the middle of winter with bad backs and aching bod-

ies, cold air still blowing from the vents no matter what the temperature was outside. At two o'clock in the morning they wake you up and tell you to clear the room. They throw through your personal belongings and then put them in the trash..."

From Texas, "the guard sprayed me with pepper spray because I wouldn't take my clothes off in front of the male guards. Then they carried me to a cell, laid me down on a steel bed and took my clothes off. They left me there in that cell with that pepper spray in my face and nothing to wash my face with. I didn't give them any reason to do that. I just didn't want to take my clothes off."

From Arizona, "the only thing you get in isolation is a peanut butter sandwich in the morning, a cheese sandwich in the afternoon and for supper another peanut butter sandwich. If you want a drink here, you have to drink toilet water."

From Missouri, "When I refused to move into a double cell, they came into my cell and dragged me out and threw me on my back. I was beaten about my face and head. One of the guards stuck his finger in my eye deliberately. I was rolled on my stomach and cuffed on my wrists with leg irons on my ankle. I was made to walk a thousand feet with the leg irons. Then they put me in a device called a restraint chair. When they put you in that chair, your hands are cuffed behind your back and tucked under your buttocks. They stripped me naked...and kept me there over 9 hours until I fouled myself on my hands which were tucked underneath me through a hole in the chair."

These past years for me have been full of hundreds of calls and complaints of an increasingly disturbing nature from prisoners and their families throughout the United States. The proportion of those complaints coming from women in prison has risen, with women describing conditions of confinement which are torture. They suffer from sexual abuse by staff, with one woman saying, "I am tired of being gynaecologically examined every time I'm searched." Another prisoner put it, "That was not part of my sentence, to...perform oral sex with officers." In one current NJ case, the woman who filed charges of rape has been kept in solitary confinement since the day she filed her complaint. This incredible woman actually held the semen in her mouth, spitting it into a plastic bag when she returned to her cell. She called last week to let me know that the guard who forced her to have sex was now back working at the prison.

Women have also reported the inappropriate use of restraints on pregnant and sick prisoners. The reports of giving birth while being handcuffed and shackled are horrible, including one woman whose baby was coming at the same time the guard who had shackled her legs was on a break somewhere else in the hospital.

Other abuses include medical care, which is often so callous that it is life threatening. We have received reports about a woman who died of pancreatic disease that went undiagnosed, about a mentally ill woman who was confined naked in a filthy cell where she ingested her own bodily waste, about a woman who suffered burns over 54% of her body and gradually lost mobility when she was denied the special bandages which would keep her skin from tightening, and from a woman who unsuccessfully begged staff for months to allow her to see a doctor. This particular woman was finally diagnosed with cancer. Though in enormous pain, she was given no pain medication. She died nine months after the diagnosis. I am currently dealing with a young woman dying of breast cancer at a prison in New Jersey where every agonizing stage of her medical care from chemotherapy to radiation has been achieved only by a war of appeals and letters on her behalf.

Couple all of this with the increased use of long term isolation, lack of treatment for substance abuse, lack of counseling services, concerns about the inappropriate use of psychotropic medications, inappropriate use of restraints and you have an increasingly clear picture of what life is like for our sisters in prison. Add the use of prison labor and our picture of the prison system continues to unfold. If you call to find out about NJ tourism, you are very likely talking to a female prisoner—one who is working for \$1.50 an hour with no vacations, union or any way to address working conditions. Perhaps worst of all is that there are far fewer advocates focused on women in prison than men. Part of the reason for this is that women are expected to be the helpers, not the helped.

Each and every one of the practices that the women have testified about, are in violation of dozens of international Treaties and Covenants that the US has signed. These practices violate the United Nations Convention Against Torture, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, UN Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a dozen other international and regional laws and standards.

There is no way to look into any aspect of prison or the wider criminal justice system without being slapped in the face with the racism and white supremacy that prisoners of color endure. If we dig deeper into these practices, the political function they serve is inescapable. Police, the

courts, the prison system and the death penalty all serve as social control mechanisms. The economic function they serve is equally as chilling. I believe that in the US criminal justice system, the politics of the police, the politics of the court, the politics of the prison system and the politics of the death penalty are a manifestation of the racism and classism which governs so much of our lives. Every part of the criminal justice system falls most heavily on the poor and people of color, including the fact that slavery was guaranteed in the United States by the 13th amendment of the Constitution. Although prison labor is not our focus today, involuntary prison slavery is real.



I work with youth in Newark, and the young people tell me that the police feel like an occupation army as if inner cities were militarized zones. They feel that the courts are used as a feeder system to filter young Blacks and Latinos into prisons where those bodies are suddenly worth a fortune. I've heard people say that the criminal justice system doesn't work. I've come to believe exactly the opposite—that it works perfectly as a matter of both economic and political policy. I don't believe it is an accident that the young adolescent of color worth nothing to this country's economy suddenly generates between 30 and 60 thousand dollars a year once trapped in the criminal justice system.

The expansion of prisons, parole and probation, the court and police systems has resulted in an enormous bureaucracy which has been a boon to everyone from architects, plumbers and electricians to food and medical vendors—all with one thing in common—a pay check earned by keeping human beings in cages in human warehouses. The criminalization of poverty is a lucrative business and we've replaced the social safety net with a dragnet. I doubt that this would be tolerated if we were talking about mostly white folks or mostly rich folks...

...The women in prison are poor and working class people who need jobs, education, drug treatment, and affordable housing for their families. There are many things we can do to push for social change. We need to link with more coalitions of diversity on mutual interests. On Thursday I participated in a forum on reparations and much of the discussion was of US domestic policies on the poor and people of color, the same things we are talking about this weekend. We need to educate ourselves on international law and prod our human rights lawyers to engage the

UN Covenants in US courts. Although international law isn't recognized in civil courts yet, we are seeing immigration courts giving consideration. We need to organize, organize, organize. Perhaps one of the things we can do is form telephone collectives to brainstorm tactics. We need to find ways to reach into women's prisons, just as we are going to have to find ways to further our own social and political consciousness and activism. I particularly urge free women to form monitoring and advocacy alliances with women in prison. Many years ago, a Vietnamese sister noted that, "when women become massively political, the revolution will have moved to a new level."

I've been part of the struggle against oppression in this country for the past 40 years. I have seen the horror and havoc that US policies can create in people's lives. I have spent time with people who have endured torture in US prisons. I have treated hundreds of ex-prisoners who have returned to our communities with symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress. I have worked with many United States political prisoners and their families for decades. I have never seen anything like what I am seeing now in US prisons. My soul is shaken by what I read in my daily mail.

What is going on in the name of all of us needs to be stopped. Poverty and prisons are state-manifested violence. I think that whites have to consciously wash off the

racism that infects us daily in a society where we are privileged in relation to people of color. I think people of color have to become specifically involved in fighting the bottom line expression of racism, classism, and oppression that the prison system represents.

Conferences like this are so important because they encourage the kind of lifetime commitment that social change requires from us. I speak all over the country on US human rights violations in our prisons. I have received the gift of working with many prisoners who lend me the experience, their intelligence and their wisdom. This means that my work is prisoner led, advised and evaluated, which I believe is necessary in forming any kind of forward movement on the issues. Until prisoner activists and outside organizations begin opposition on a more serious level, neither prison administrators nor the US government has to respond to our complaints. Each of us needs to use any forum that we have available to describe the connections between slavery and the criminal justice system, between US domestic policies towards people of color and US international policies towards countries of color. We need to stand up and say "not in my name" will you commit these atrocities any more. There are many reasons to get involved in these issues—human decency being the most compelling.

Women in Prison in the US: the Facts

1. There are nearly 900,000 women currently under correctional supervision in the US. Approximately 15% are confined to prisons and jails. (BJS Sourcebook).
2. There are now 46 women on Death Row nationwide. Almost half had a history of abuse and are there for the murder of an abusive spouse or lover, most often in defense of their lives and the lives of their children.
3. Self-defense is involved approximately 77 times more frequently when women kill men than when men kill women. According to the *Sourcebook for Criminal Justice Statistics*, 55% of all women will be raped and/or physically assaulted in their lives. Over one-half of all women murdered are killed by a spouse or partner.
4. In some surveys, 90% of battered women who reported assault to the police actually signed complaints, but fewer than 1% of the cases were ever prosecuted.
5. Women are the fastest growing sector of the entire prison population. Since 1980, the female inmate population nationwide has increased more than 500% (*Bureau of Statistics, 1998*). But this is not due to increases in more serious criminal behavior. In 1979, women were sent to prison for nonviolent crimes roughly 49% of the time. In 1986, women were sent to prison for nonviolent crimes roughly 59% of the time. Currently, women are sent to prison for nonviolent crimes nearly 80% of the time (*Bureau of Prisons population report*).
6. 80% of imprisoned women have children and of those women, 70% are single mothers. Prior to their imprisonment, 84.7% of female prisoners (as compared to 46.6% of male prisoners) had custody of their children.
7. Women prisoners spend on average 17 hours a day in their cell with 1 hour outside for exercise. Male prisoners spend on average 15 hours a day in their cell with one-and-a-half hours outside.
8. Mothers in prison are less likely to be visited by their children than are fathers because women are shipped to other counties or remote areas of a state more often than men, and because children of incarcerated parents are often moved for foster care.
9. A survey conducted in 38 states revealed that 58% of the prisons or jails serve exactly the same diet to pregnant prisoners as to others and in most cases do not meet the minimum recommended allowances for pregnancy.
10. In early 1998, 2,200, or 3.5% of all female state prisoners were HIV-positive (*US Bureau of Justice*). Incarcerated HIV infected women have no access to experimental drugs, compassionate use and new drug